



# GENDER HIERARCHY AND BENGALI WOMEN: LOOKING THROUGH THE MIRAGE OF MORALITY

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## ABSTRACT

Since the colonial period and even after the ushering of the neo-liberal phase, one of the core elements intrinsically related to the gender issue is the element of hierarchical proposition in the relations between genders. Women's morality and respectability vis-à-vis society in general and family in particular is a sensitive though much discussed and debated aspect of that hierarchy in gender relations. This paper, however, tends to identify, chart and conceptualize the continuous process of negotiation, renegotiation and redefinition between hierarchy and morality, its changing features and nature etc. During colonial period (since the last decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century) the contours of morality for women was well defined by male hierarchy which mainly emphasized on the clear line of demarcation between the public-private discourse for women, the transgression of which was considered immoral, shameful and, interestingly, masculine.

In this paper the concept of morality in relation to gender hierarchy will be viewed from three different time frames in conjunction with the idea of social change: the colonial period, early post-independent period and the post-liberalization phase. This paper will try to examine whether the Bengali women have been able to transgress the line of morality set by the male dominated 'bhadralok' society and, if yes, whether they are still considered to be moral. Here the effects of liberalization process and their effects on Bengali women will be studied to try and find out whether their maneuvering space has really expanded or not. This paper will look into some of the writings by the Bengali female writers as case studies and try and get a sense as to whether the boundaries of expression by women are contracting or expanding and what can be the repercussions in either of the cases.

**KEYWORDS:** Women; Morality; Gender Hierarchy; Lakshmi; Bhadraklok

## INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALISING MORALITY

Since the colonial period and even after the ushering of the neo-liberal phase, one of the core elements intrinsically related to the issue of gender development and women empowerment is the idea of morality of women. Women's morality and respectability vis-à-vis society in general and family in particular is a sensitive though much discussed and debated topic. In the nineteenth century the question of Indian women, according to the British critic, was not that "what do women want" but "how can they be modernised". Influential British writers of the nineteenth and the twentieth century condemned the contemporary Indian religions, culture and society and their rules and the customs and rituals regarding the women. They argued that, at any cost, a new gender ideology and modification of the treatment towards women were essential for any positive change. The Indians reconstituted those ideas on morality to fit with their own perceptions.

Moral theory, as produced and developed by the theorists like Bentham, Mill, Hume, Kant et.al later opened up a new genre of counter argument by some feminist scholars, which according to them has not been uninfluenced by the almost universal masculinity of its creators, they have argued that the masculinity of the authors has affected the very content of the theory itself (Nicholson 1983). Chodorow, has drawn attention to a culturally universal difference between early female and male socialization: that the first and primary caretaker for girls but not for boys is a member of the same gender as they. One consequence of this difference is that young boys, to develop their own identity as masculine, must negate their early identification with their mother (Carol 1982). As a result, young boys tend to see social relationships as potentially threatening to their sense of self; protection against threats to their sense of autonomy takes on a high value in their lives. Young girls on the contrary incline toward defining themselves in terms of their connections to others. Thus where men tend to fear engulfment by others, women fear abandonment (Nicholson, *op.cit.*). While anthropological research appears to reveal a universal division of labor according to gender and while this division appears to bear some element of a "domestic/public" division, it is only with the growth of the more nuclearized family and the nation-state in the early modern period that masculinity and femininity take on those specific qualities with which we are now familiar (Carol, *op.cit.*). Thus it is only with the development of the family in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as an emotional unit bonded by feelings of affection among its members that there also begins to develop the ideal of the female as a being more emotional and affective than the male.

## Early Nineteenth Century: Social Reform and Reshuffling Morality

In the early part of the nineteenth century major developments took place whereby the influence of Western education and English language increased in a significant manner. One of the notable developments among them was the 'Macaulay Minute' of 1835 whereby a major shift was brought about by the colonial government with the replacement of Oriental education with Western

education. Under this new piece of legislation the major emphasis was to be placed on imparting education through the medium of English. Major Indian thinkers, philosophers and social reformers gradually came in contact with the world of Western education. Prominent among them were Ram Mohan Roy, Dakshina Ranjan Mukhopadhyay, Radhakanta Deb, Rev. Krishna Mohan Bandopadhyay, et.al. As these figures experienced a completely new set of values and philosophers they started to question those customs and practices within the age-old tradition which were hitherto considered pious and good. Gradually as the Indian reformers become 'enlightened' with the progressive knowledge transfer and culture from the West, in the broader context of the nineteenth century the question of modernity came to be equated with the condition of women in the country. Qualities which are associated with the emotional component of human nature like, sympathy, compassion, kindness, caring for others, has also been linked with femininity by the western philosophers and thus adapted by the intelligentsia. The general notion of the nineteenth century developmental phenomenon was that some primary education was necessary for women to increase their domestic value and so opportunities were restricted to that purpose only (Ghosh 2004). The Hindu society, a depot of conservatism and orthodoxy, was so strong to idealize and execute its opinion, made Bethune realized when he opened his school in 1849, as he addressed the meeting with the purpose to give girls some vernacular language teaching including sewing etc. so that the girls could be trained to be 'good mothers, wives and daughters' (Bethune's Speech, 1849). Later, with the growth of the new enlightened group of intelligentsia, the want of literate wives increased to a large extent so that they could build their conjugal lives with greater reciprocity.

With the encouragement from their husbands, wives came to understand the importance of domestic hygiene, use of modern furniture, dressing children well etc (Ghosh, *op.cit.*). What was the notion of the Brahms regarding the education of women? This is to be found in the pages of the '*Bamabodhini Patrika*' and even the women voiced in the same way. As for example, Gyanadanandini Debi was a modern woman in its true sense. She revolutionised the method of wearing the sari, went to Britain without being escorted by any male member of the family, entertained her husband's British colleagues to a dinner in a professional manner, but interestingly ultimately argued in the same traditional way "that feminine success lay in the ability to be a competent wife and mother" (Karlekar 1986). A few years later, Priyambada Bagchi, a graduate from the Calcutta University, wrote in the '*Antahpur*' in 1892, on the need for women's education to be more feminine in orientation. Radharani Lahiri, who had been associated with the progressive Brahmo attempts of introducing education for the girls, felt, nonetheless, that despite all that women learned, 'housework is the most important' (*ibid.*). Even in 1902 (B.S.1310), the mentality of that group of people remained the same. Amritalal Gupta wrote in the '*phalgun-chaitra*' issue of B.S.1310 of the '*Bamabodhini Patrika*' with the heading '*Sikkhito Mohilar Daitwo*' (Responsibility of an Educated Women):

...The reason we consider for the higher education of women is the proper upbringing of their child. ... if the women after getting higher education surrender the educational responsibilities of their children in the hands of the tutors and spend their own time on reading novels and entertainment or make their children comfortable with the new dresses and various material things then there is no hope for the boys of this country to become perfect men. (Translation mine)

Though there was another facet of the Brahmos who were actually progressive and radical in nature and thinking, was not very successful in executing their ideals. They neither believed in any limited kind of education for women nor found any inferiority among the female sex. We find the expression of their progressive thoughts in the pages of the monthly journal '*Banga Mahila*'. *Stree Loker Prakrita Swadhinata* (the actual freedom of the women) was published in the issue of '*Aashar*' (Bengali month), B.S.1282 (c.1875),

... There are so many books for the development of Bengali women, so many published articles, so many lectures - but what good has been done? ... The English women get education in well manner. Becoming educated and knowledgeable they may realize that, how much is that painful to live under one's dominance and sympathy. But nothing to do - they are deprived of job value...is there really any need of this kind of education? ... We are also suffering from the same condition. So I pray to the intelligentsia for God sake, please give us real freedom ... If you become able to take ultimate care of yourself, that is, however, the real education and freedom. (Translation mine)

### Countering the Western Wave: The 'Grihalakshmi' Phenomenon

In spite of the presence of a radical and progressive line of thinking among some of the social activists and reformers, the issue of women's progress and development especially in the fields of higher education, professional and economic independence, etc. did not receive substantial popularity. An interesting aspect which needs to be mentioned at this juncture is that the opposition to women's freedom of professional independence was witnessed primarily in the fields which were traditionally male dominated. In the late nineteenth century a new trend of nationalist thinking developed which was primarily hinged upon the idea of countering the Western influence through the overt emphasis on the idea of indigenous. Resultantly, many of the activities of the late nineteenth century reformers began to be considered as aiding in the degradation of the Hindu religion. Partha Chatterjee, in his '*Nation and its Fragments*', has made detailed comments on the attitudes of such new nationalists educationists. It was feared that the English education will engender the westernized beliefs and behaviours among the Indian women. The mid nineteenth century ideas of reform gave way to a strong current of conservatism in which what was indigenous and traditional was sought to be glorified. Images of India as a monstrous mother-goddess and as a woman raped and dishonored by foreign (Muslim and British) conquest were prominent in the militant Hindu nationalism advanced by Aurobindo Ghose and V. Savarkar (Hancock 2001). The new brand of nationalism with a strong Hindu undertone made a distinction between home and the outer world. They preached for classicized tradition, reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality (Ghosh, *op.cit.*). They were of opinion that women must be educated, even they should get higher education, but they also must respect the superior national culture. They had to provide quintessentially nationalist claim of being different yet modern. There was a cautious sense of adapting the very Victorian subject of 'domestic science' to the 19th century nationalist programmes of educating women which considered the home a site of and symbol for nationalist modernity, its proponents sought to reform women's education and to reorganize domestic life in ways that both appropriated and critiqued the norms of both Euro-western modernity and emergent nationalisms of colonial India (Hancock, *op.cit.*) Elite homes were among the sites where these new interests were expressed, in the forms of artistic and cultural associations, clubs, and schools. Homes were also spaces where nationalist modernities, which appropriated and contested Euro-Western behaviors and material culture, were fashioned and displayed through decoration, clothes, crafts, and handiwork. In elite nationalisms, the privatisation of domesticity accompanied efforts to frame homes both as (feminine) 'backstage' of new (masculine) public realms, and as sites for producing new nationalised and classed subjects who espoused modernist values of individualism and scientific rationality (*ibid.*).

One important argument favoring to impart the right kind of education to women was to incorporate true Lakshmi-like nature into them. Invocation of Lakshmi into 'new domesticity' was not a traditionalist concept to fight with modernity. Conceptualising Lakshmi through education was an indispensable part of a nationalist, and self-consciously articulated, search for domestic 'happiness'. What was understood among upper-caste Hindus as womanly beauty and auspiciousness was produced and maintained through bodily modalities, such as giving, receiving, and wearing gold jewelry and silk saris. A woman's refusal to enter such circuits, or her modification of them, had the potential to generate conflict of the sort that could compromise family honor as well as the woman's own reputation and autonomy. Producing 'Grihalakshmis' through the means of formal education became a self-appointed task of a new civilising nationalism (Chakrabarty 1993). Not only had the male writers of the period written in this particular line of direction but the women also. It was basically the originating point of the historical process through which a modern patriarchal discourse was

fashioned by the Hindu Bengali bhadralok under the twin pressures of colonial rule and emerging nationalist sentiments.

The very elitist nature which was a dominant feature of male dominated bhadralok nationalism, was also present in the women's organisations, who failed to move beyond a particular section of population primarily comprising of the urban middle class and also failed to adopt a radical ideology like the demand of complete autonomy for women. The reason behind the failure was that, these women's organisations matured with male support and flourished in partnership with male dominated nationalist parties (Forbes 1998). Because of the presence of the male dominated middle class who acted as the social mediators voicing for the rights of women, the women were left in a tight spot where they had to choose between nationalism and feminism. One strong critique regarding the activities of the middle class was that they only thought of upgrading the poor condition of their womenfolk but never talked about gender equality. Since earlier times, the very notion regarding their differences of roles, functions and desires based on the idea of sex was taken for granted which led to the two sexes being differently reared and treated. Over time this difference was itself adduced as a major reason for women's conditions (Kumar 1993). Even to Gandhi the two sexes were different rather than complementary.

### 'Lakshmi' Under the Dawn of Independence

The condition of women also remained largely unchanged in the immediate years of the post independent period and the decade of 1950s. This period have always been closely identified with Jawaharlal Nehru and his dreams of a modern India. It was under his leadership that, the people of the nation dreamt of enjoying a true democracy and a new national identity. But the actual scenario, more particularly as the statistics shows, the modernisation program ushered under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru never included women except some minority representation among them. Interestingly the decades of 1950 and 60's, which saw the overpowering and all-encompassing dominance of the idea of the nation (because of the newly found political independence) was also called "the silent period" of the women's movement. As it has been argued, despite the strong commitment to equality and social benefits, the communitarian alternative privileged over the civil, political and property rights of conservatives, the socialist societies that existed continued to share the conservatives' endorsement of charismatic leadership to articulate and enforce an ambitious vision of society (Elliot 2008). Feminism grasped the reality that politically, liberal citizenship was derived from a basic distinction drawn between the private and the public, thereby intrinsically excluding women from public life and leaving them unprotected from abuse within the family (Krishnaraj 2009). Even today the documents and statistics pertaining to domestic violence reveals to us that the arms of the state (police, judiciary, etc.) on many occasions dismiss abuse of women as the "private" concern of families. We cannot see politics and its preconditions as resting on a pre-political private sphere because politics and its preconditions are themselves politically constructed. The philosophy of empowerment of the "individual" may sound attractive but it cannot pursue its own goals without regard to the claims and needs of others. We need a definition of empowerment that can travel into the worlds of community as well as that of individualism (Elliot *op.cit.*). The ideal ought to be what rights one has should be independent of the community and gender to which one belongs. The history of the drive for women's human rights indicates that only when women can become literate, articulate their view of life, when they can organize and demand equality and when they can think of themselves as citizens as well as wives and mothers and when men take more responsibility for care of children and the home, can women be full and equal citizens (Fraser 2003). As far as the idea of citizenship is concerned, India has a long way to traverse where women's entitlements will be linked effectively to the very idea itself. There is an inherent ambiguity in the position of women within the constitutionally granted concept of equality. In the debates surrounding women's entry into the public sphere, in literature and cinema, from the pre-independence period to the present day, notions of the rightful place for women, as the domestic and femininity as their naturally given character echo repeatedly.

The Nehruvian era, which has set the pattern of economic development for the next 40 years to follow, provides important clues for understanding the failure of modernisation project in getting rid of gender discrimination within the household and at the workplace. In spite of presiding in the 1930s over a committee on women's status, Nehru and the Planning Commission under his leadership in the post-independent India proceeded to discard the radical economic measures the committee had recommended to establish parity between men and women. Instead, the unproblematic tradition of regarding women as targets for household and motherhood-oriented welfare services was given recognition in official policy documents (Banerjee 1998). Thus, challenging the patriarchal ethos of society has never been the agenda of the Indian state in a strong way. In 1934, in an address at Prayag mahila Vidyapith, Allahabad, Nehru said,

If our nation is to rise, how can it do so if half the nation, if our woman-kind, lag behind and remain ignorant and uneducated? How can our children grow up into self-reliant and efficient citizens of India if their mothers are not themselves self-reliant and efficient?...Our civilization, our customs, our laws, have all been made by man and he has taken good care to keep himself in a superior position and to treat woman as a chattel and a plaything to be exploited for his own

advantage and amusement...For all of us, therefore, the first problem that presents itself is how to free India and remove the many burdens of the Indian masses. But the women of India have an additional task and that is to free themselves from the tyranny of man-made customs and laws. They will have to carry on this second struggle by themselves, for man is not likely to help them. Our marriage laws and many of our out-of-dated customs which hold us back and specially crush our womenfolk-will you not combat them and bring them in line with modern conditions? (Gopal 1993)

In a speech at a girls' college in New Delhi in 1950, Nehru mentioned that women's education was important for making "better homes, better family and better society". He showed his displeasure at the "sloppy" way in which Indians keep their houses and said that women are chiefly responsible for running the home and should know how to do this in an orderly and aesthetic way (Gopal, op.cit.). Later in 1958, Nehru wrote,

... yet the greatest revolution in a country is the one that affects the status and living conditions of its women. It is in so far as our revolution has affected our women that it is basic. I believe it has done so, not perhaps in a dramatic and aggressive way but rather after the old Indian fashion of combining change with continuity. And yet there have been many dramatic phases of this change even in our time. (Nehru, 1958)

The much stigmatised ideals of grihalakshmi, identity and morality which are attached to women from the very colonial period are still in existence in today's society even when there is so much talk on the idea of women empowerment. Even the dismal performance (in terms of independence of decision making) of a women's organisation (The Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti) under the so-called secular political force like the Communist Party of India (Marxist), reflects the sorry state of affairs vitiating the overall political environment in relation to the notion of women's empowerment. The well celebrated literary pieces, starting from the vernacular periodicals and novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth century written by both men and women, hint at the precarious situation surrounding this idea. What we find in novels like Ashapura Devi's 'Subarnarekha', Samaresh Majumdar's 'Satkahan' and Suchitra Bhattacharya's 'Ardhek Aakash', is that though there was a change in the situation where the perceptions and demands of the society underwent modifications, but when ultimately the question of intimate womanhood came into discussion, the very notions and parameters were still the same. A readership survey conducted in 1981 and 1992 in Eastern India shows that, Shankar's (a famous Bengali writer) novels scored the highest in all categories of income and age distribution for regular readers of weekly magazines. Women were by far the largest consumers of these novels and Shankar was nominated by 82% of those surveyed as their favourite writer. They were overwhelmingly Hindu and categorised themselves as married, middle-class, cheerful, film-goers, moderately to highly educated and traditional and 'stay at home'. A reflection of this sordid condition marking the idea of womanhood can be found in the writings of the contemporary Bengali novelists (some of them women). An example is Suchitra Bhattacharya's novel titled 'Ardhek Aakash', where the character named Paromita in spite of being an educated and independent woman ultimately gets bogged down by the very notions of duty and responsibility typically attached to women.

#### 'Grihalakshmi' Today: The Present Scenario

With the advent of the twenty-first century, the defining markers of which have been development and progress, what we find is that there is interestingly the parallel existence of restrictive mechanisms on women's progress (albeit reformulated) along with their notable development. These new modes of restrictions are primarily based on the age-old ideas of morality as discussed in the earlier sections. The primary constituents of this line of thinking remain unchanged till date. The act of continuous emphasis on the morality and modesty of women and in the due process equating it with the concept of familial honour is in itself a severely restricting one for women. It is intrinsically connected with the age old concept of 'Grihasobha' or 'Grihalakshmi' as is still very much in practice. The beauty (though crude) in this exercise lies in the fact that on the outer periphery it is very dignified and respectful in appearance but the real purpose which it fulfils is restricting the freedom of the female sex. One of the most important ends met by this exercise is the creation of a condition whereby women in pursuing their goal of power and security within the joint family, often accommodate dominant ideas of what is appropriate behavior. These strategies of women for advancing their interests merely contribute to the constitution of dominant gender structures. Here the element of 'honour' is produced and transmitted by the system without the consent or wish of the target recipient. In this structure the recipient is just a passive observer with no power to dictate the terms and conditions of the exercise undertaken or question its utility or purpose. The interesting thing to note here is that the maintenance of the system is put forward as the ultimate necessity for the preservation of both the donor and the recipient. Any changes or modifications in the system are seen as something uncalled for especially for the women since they are not well equipped to grasp the changes which may lead to their harming themselves. The very element of 'justification' is embedded within the system itself where the authority to look after the providence of sanctity of the system is interestingly present within the system itself. In this regard the very denigration of the identity of women from an independent entity to that of a 'rape victim' itself points towards the sorry state of the times we are living in. It is also indicative of the constant effort on the part of

the male dominated society to create an atmosphere of fear (the corollary to which is the providing of a protective shield) instead of concentrating on the real causes of the problem. It is important to note that, one of the most prominent women leaders from a national party commented that the survivor's life is now worse than death. By commenting in this fashion she was endorsing the patriarchal value system that itself produces rape. The idea of family honour is said to be dependent on the propriety of women's actions and is closely connected with women's modesty for which the presence of the threat of getting raped is undeniable. The woman caste is so vulnerable that any type of unlimited step in any field could destroy the honor (izzat) of her family (ghar).

The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world-and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir. (Chatterjee 1989).

This repeated emphasis on the idea of the modesty and honour of women is also evident from the writings of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay who writes:

Modesty, or decorum in manner and conduct, he says, is a specifically human trait; it does not exist in animal nature. It is human aversion to the purely animal traits that gives rise to virtues such as modesty. In this aspect, human beings seek to cultivate in themselves, and in their civilization, spiritual or god-like qualities wholly opposed to forms of behavior which prevail in animal nature. Further, within the human species, women cultivate and cherish these god-like qualities far more than men. (Chatterjee 1989).

The female victims are blamed, stigmatised, cast out, doubted, re-victimised, and showered with abuse in the wake of their ordeals and interestingly the practice is so normalised, so culturally ingrained, that we would not even notice (Chatterjee 2014).

It is here that the idea of women's unconditional right to access public space becomes very important. The powerful influence of the culture of domination is also evident where we find women getting accustomed to justifying their presence in the public space to such an extent that it seems it has now got internalised in their system. Women's unconditional access to public spaces becomes very important if one wishes to reengage, reconfigure and redefine the concept of modesty in a more objectified manner. There are, of course, no quick fixes in sight but one of the concerted efforts which need to be made to redefine the idea of morality of women is the spread of more gender-sensitive and humane education. Though the issue of women's progress and empowerment has gained substantial support from various quarters of the society in recent times, but what is being observed is that majority of the population seem unable to transgress the volatile line of cultural dictates. Though the scenario is not ideal in the present times, but hope can be derived from the very fact that the frequency of the tussle between secular and progressive notions of education and regressive cultural dogmas seem to be increasing. Only this unrelenting exercise based on ideas of progressive thinking coupled with the intention of redesigning and reformulating the codifications of the idea of 'culture' can lead to sustainable and marked development for women.

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